Reminiscences of My Boyhood in Roslyn

Charles Woodin's ice plant

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Do young people today ever wonder how their grandparents kept their food refrigerated before the electrical age? I guess, that if they were asked, they would say, "They used ice." And of course they would be right. But would they know where the ice came from? When I was a boy, during the first quarter of the twentieth century here in Roslyn, there were two sources of ice: one was natural ice, and the other was manufactured ice.

Natural ice was cut from the various ponds in the area during the winter season. The largest pond and the nearest was the grist mill pond, known today as Silver Lake. The ice on this pond was often eight or ten inches thick. It was cut and stored in an ice house at the northeast side of the pond behind Desson's butcher shop on East Broadway.

The cakes of ice were cut by hand with a long saw with large teeth. The area to be cut was marked off on the ice in a large grid. This was done with a horse pulling a scraping device with teeth which cut lines on the ice. As the cakes were sawed out they were drawn up into the ice house by a horse. The cakes of ice were secured by a pair of tongs to a rope which went over a pulley fastened at the peak of the roof of the ice house and then returned to the pond where it was attached to the horse. As the horse walked out on the ice away from the ice house the cake of ice was pulled up a slide and into the ice house.

The ice house was built with insulated walls and each layer of ice that was placed in the ice house was covered with saw dust as insulation for the next layer. The cutting of the ice left open water, which would freeze during the next cold spell, giving the skaters beautiful black ice to skate on until the next snow. Eventually, when the ice became thick enough, it would be cut again and stored in the ice house.

The next summer some of the ice would be used by the butcher and the rest sold house-to-house from an ice wagon. Thus the house holders were supplied with ice for their refrigerators or iceboxes.

John F. Remsen, our neighbor, and a friend of my father's, had been in the ice business during the early 1900's. He told me that he used to buy ice from farmers who had ponds on their property. He would have his men cut and store the ice in his ice house during the winter where it would be held for sale to local homes during the summer.

Some years the weather would not be cold enough to produce enough ice for Mr. Remsen's needs, and he would have to buy ice from ice houses up the Hudson River. This imported ice was delivered by railroad in special freight cars built to carry ice, a very costly operation in which our neighbor usually lost money.

Mr. Remsen also told me a story about an annual problem he had when filling the ice house on an estate in Roslyn Harbor. This ice house was on the southside of the main house, near a bay window where the elderly grandmother sat to sun herself. The grandmother counted each cake of ice that went into the ice house and kept a record of each year's count. Each winter she would insist that Mr. Remsen call in person to explain why the count was more or less than the year before. Mr. Remsen said that as long as she lived he was never able to convince her that the thickness of the cakes of natural ice varied with the coldness of the weather. Therefore, a cold winter would produce thicker cakes of ice and the thicker the cakes of ice, the less number would be needed to fill a particular size ice house. The natural ice business was very variable.

During my boyhood natural ice was gradually being supplanted by manufactured ice. In Roslyn, an ice plant had been built on the east side of Hempstead Harbor just south of what is now the boundary line between the Village of Roslyn and the Village of Roslyn Harbor. It was built on a pier which extended out to the channel so that coal barges could be brought in on the tide and tied up to the south side of the pier. This ice plant was owned by Charles Woodin, who lived on the corner of West Shore Rd. and Mott Ave. That is, on the old corner of West Shore Rd., and Mott Ave. which is now covered by the western approach to the Roslyn Viaduct.

Mr. Woodin's daughter, Hazel, is known to hundreds of former Roslyn Heights children, as Mrs. Monestel, who taught kindergarten at the Roslyn Heights School and later at the Highlands School.

Charles Woodin's ice plant was one of the largest buildings in Roslyn. It was several stories high with a tall metal chimney held in place by a number of long metal wires The sides of the building and the roof were covered by corrugated iron sheets. I don't remember any windows but there must have been some, probably on the dock side of the building.

I do remember the loading platform on the east side of the building. It was built so that it was level with the bed of the ice wagons that came there for ice. There were no windows on the east side of the building and only two doors, a regular size door that a man could walk through and a very small door, just large enough to allow a 300-pound cake of ice through.

There was an electric bell button at the side of the door. When the button was pushed it rang a bell somewhere way inside the building, which aroused the person inside, who called out to inquired what was wanted. Billy Jenkins, who worked for my father would answer by calling out, "fifty pounds for Moger." Within a few minutes the small door would fly open and out would slide a fifty-pound piece of ice onto the platform and the little door would snap shut again.

Billy would cover the piece of ice with a burlap bag which he had ready. He would slide it over to the edge of the platform near our cart. We would come down off the platform. Billy would lift the piece of ice into the cart. We would get in and hurry home to get the ice in our icebox before too much of it had melted away.

One of my recollections of our visits to the ice plant was watching Clarence Mackay's ice wagons being loaded with ice. There were two large heavy wagons each drawn by a team of beautiful work horses. The wagon bodies were covered with white canvas stretched over large hoops similiar to the tops of the prairie schooners that took the pioneers across the western plains. Each wagon held, I believe, nine 300-pound cakes of ice.

These large cakes of ice, about one foot by two feet by three feet, came sliding through the small door, across the platform and, with the help of the driver, right into the wagon, until the wagon was full. The cakes of ice were then covered with a heavy piece of canvas and the tailboard of the wagon was hooked in place. The driver climbed onto his seat, waved to us and called to his horses. The horses strained to the harness and the wagon with 2,700 pounds of ice began the long haul to the mansion on the top of Harbor Hill.

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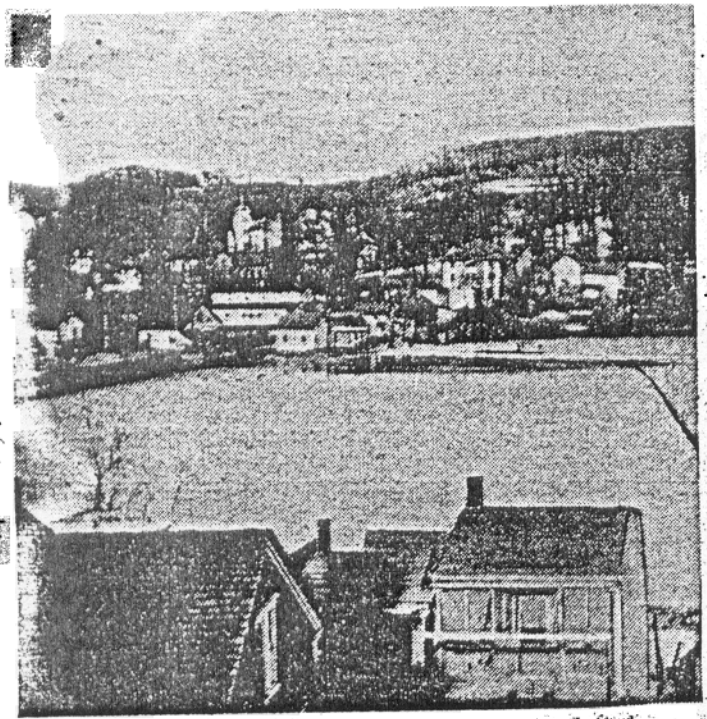

CUTTING ICE on Silver Lake. This picture was taken around 1910.

To me, as a small boy five or six years old, the two wagons seemed to be carrying a lot of ice for a household of a mother, a father, and three children, and the two drivers. My family included my mother and father and Billy as well as myself and all we needed was a fifty-pound piece of ice. I used to wonder why they needed so much ice.

It was not until some thirty-five years later, in the late 1940's, when the Mackay house had been abandoned and vandals had made it possible to enter the house at will through open windows and doors, that I found the answer. While exploring the basement of the house I discovered a huge icebox or refrigerator. It was much larger than any I had ever seen in any butcher shop. It was bigger than the Desson and the Craft iceboxes put together. (There were two butchers in Roslyn in the early 1900's. Desson's butcher shop was on the west side of East Broadway about opposite Vernon Ave. and Craft's butcher shop was on School St. across from Hewlett and Remsen's garage. This building still stands at 1435 Old Northern Blvd.)

There was a wide ramp that entered the basement of the Mackay house, wide enough to allow the ice wagon to be backed into the basement of the house so the ice could be unloaded right into the refrigerator or icebox.

I also became aware, as I grew older, that the Mackay household consisted of many more people than a mother, father, three children and the two teamsters. I believe, there were approximately one hundred servants plus the family. There were also a number of other buildings on the estate that used ice besides the main house. There was the dairy barn, the dairyman's cottage, the stable, where the coachman and stable boys lived, just to mention a few.

As I have said, natural ice was supplanted by manufactured ice. At the same time, the horse was being supplanted by the automobile. Our horse was sold in 1915. Our automobile was much too spendid to carry ice, so our ice was delivered by Mr. Helm, who drove Mr. Woodin's ice wagon. During hot spells in midsummer, Mr. Helm might make deliveries every day. At other times in summer he might make deliveries every other day or at least twice a week. (I can rembmer my mother being worried a whether the ice would last until the next delivery and watching for the ice wagon.) Eventually, as the weather became cooler, he might only deliver ice every other week or so.

The ice business was very problematical to say the least, but to the housewife, refrigeration and the preservation of food was a constant worry. Now with electric refrigeration this worry has been reduced to a minimum.

Although the demise of the ice wagon and the development of the electric refrigerator has made life much easier, it has taken away one of the delights of the children of an earlier day. I used to eagerly await the arrival of Mr. Helm and Woodin's ice wagon on a hot or even not-so-hot summer day. He would be seen by my mother as he drove up the driveway and she would rush out to the icebox on the back porch to see how large a piece of ice she would need.

I would rush out to watch the horse and the procedure Mr. H went through to get the prope piece to fit our icebox. First he would let down the tailgate of the wagon, climb up into the wagon and pull the heavy piece of canvas off the nearest cake of ice which he would slide to the back of the wagon. He would then get out and with his ice pick, he would cut from the large cake of ice a piece of suitable size.

As the ice pick chipped the cake, small pieces would fly off onto the wagon bed. These chips were what I was waiting for. It was a great delight to suck on a piece of cold ice on a hot summer day. Mr. Helm made sure that I had my fill of ice chips. The Eskimo Pie truck, or later the Good Humor truck and their successors with their ice cream and ices on sticks can never equal the joy of free ice from an ice wagon.